

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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FEDERAL PERMIT SOUGHT TO REMOVE REMAINING ENDANGERED DUSKY SEASIDE SPARROWS FROM THE WILD

The U.S. species closest to extinction--the dusky seaside sparrow--may be taken into captivity for safekeeping and propagation under a proposal by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission.

The proposal--an application for a permit under the Endangered Species Act--must be approved by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Public comment will be accepted through April 23 on the State's application which is based on the recommendation last fall of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow Recovery Team, a group of Federal, State, and private experts on the species appointed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The recommendation supplements the approved recovery plan drafted by the team, which assigned to the State lead responsibility for developing techniques for propagating and restocking the sparrows in the wild. Recovery plans--developed for all native U.S. endangered species--outline the actions that are needed to restore species to the point that they are no longer threatened with extinction.

Last spring, only 13 of the 1-ounce songbirds were found in the annual survey of their habitat in or near the St. Johns National-Wildlife Refuge near Cape Canaveral. Three of these were captured in September and placed in captive breeding facilities at the Commission's Wildlife Research Laboratory at Gainesville.

The dusky seaside sparrow has been in serious jeopardy for the past several years, with its numbers consistently dropping by half each year. In 1977, there were fewer than 50 birds; the following year, 24; and in 1979, only 13. Wildlife biologists fear this pattern may repeat itself again this year. The permit application proposes taking the remaining birds into captivity to prevent further losses and to protect the genetic pool, including an experimental effort to freeze-dry sperm for possible future use.

The brown, 5-inch bird is heavily streaked with black on its underparts with a brilliant yellow stripe outlining its bill and wing curve. It apparently has produced no offspring in recent years. No courting behavior has been observed, leading to speculation that there may be no females. Males are known to be present, having been identified by their song during spring mating season. Two of the birds now in captivity are males; the sex of the third has not yet been determined.

The dusky population was dealt a severe blow in 1975 when it was nearly wiped out by wildfire which temporarily destroyed most of its habitat on the St. Johns refuge. Even before that disaster the population was in decline, falling from an estimated 4,000 birds in the 1950's to fewer than 700 by 1968, shortly after it was declared an endangered species. It has since disappeared from its former habitat on Merritt Island where it once was fairly abundant, and now exists only in three small, separated colonies in the St. Johns refuge area. According to last year's survey, one colony of two birds

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is on private property which lies between the two units of the refuge; colonies of four birds live on each of the two refuge units. The dusky usually ranges less than a mile from its territory or nesting area. It requires an open habitat of marshy cordgrasses.

Loss of this habitat has been a significant factor in the decline of the dusky. Dikes, impoundments, flooding, insecticides, cattle grazing, uncontrolled burning, conversion of the land for agriculture, invading shrubbery, and predators--all have contributed to the dusky's plight. The St. Johns refuge was acquired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1971 to preserve suitable habitat for the rare bird.

Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said a decision would be made on the permit application later this spring or summer following a "saturation" survey to arrive at the exact number of birds and to determine whether any nesting has occurred. The survey will be conducted in April and May by Service, State, and Florida Audubon Society officials,

"Also, before a decision is made and after the results of the survey are known," Greenwalt said, "a formal biological opinion must be issued on whether the State's proposal will benefit or be a detriment to the species. Public comment will also be taken into account in our decision making process."

The biological opinion results from a "Section 7 Consultation," a procedure required by the Endangered Species Act of all Federal agencies on actions they fund, approve, or conduct that are likely to affect endangered species. In this case, both a Federal permit and Federal funds are involved. Under a cooperative agreement with the Service, the State last year received a grant of \$73,500 to help carry out its responsibilities under the recovery plan. Another grant of \$53,300 has been approved this year.

Comments on the permit application and requests for additional information should be sent to the Federal Wildlife Permit Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240; telephone 703/235-1903. Notice of the application appeared in the March 13 and March 25 Federal Register.

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Note to Editors: Black and white glossies are available by calling 202/343-5612.